The Fourth Church Pulpit

LET ALL THINGS NOW LIVING

November 19, 1995

John M. Buchanan

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for he leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes ...

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any — lifted from the no
of all nothing — human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

e. e. cummings

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago
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I participated in an extraordinary event yesterday. I was invited by Dr. Joan Brown Campbell, Executive Secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ, to be part of a small delegation to go to Washington and meet with the President. The National Council of Churches General Board, on which I sit as a representative of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), met in Oakland, California last week and passed a resolution asking the President and Congress, on behalf of the Churches who are members of the Council, to remember the poor, the vulnerable, the sick and elderly and the children as the current budget negotiations are carried out.

So yesterday I was part of a small group which met with the President. My specific responsibility was to represent urban churches which do good work but which cannot, alone, fill the gaps in absolutely necessary services to the homeless, poor, sick and elderly currently under consideration for reduction or elimination.

This is a defining moment for America. There is much non-partisan consensus about the budget:

- that it must be brought into balance;
- that it ought to stimulate the rethinking and renewal of the welfare system;
- that it ought to promote and foster economic growth.

What the NCC said was that while fostering individual responsibility and community accountability it ought also help provide for the neediest and most vulnerable of our citizens.

On behalf of the churches we urged the President to veto any budget that backs away from responsibility for the needy. We told him it was not a partisan, political issue, but a moral and theological issue and the NCC will ask for an opportunity to say the same thing to Mr. Dole and Mr. Gingrich.

At the end of our time with him, Bishop Nathaniel Linsey of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church prayed with eloquence and strength.

When I had my few moments with him I said: "Mr. President, Keep the Faith" and I said that we would pray for him and for our nation this morning and he said "we all need that."

So will you join me now in prayer:

> Almighty and merciful God, Lord of all nations, we pray for our President in this critical hour. Give him strength and courage to be the President of all the people. Give him integrity and determination to do what is right and just and good. We pray for his wife and his daughter. Keep them in your care.
>
> We pray for leaders in congress, our representatives. Bless them with your gifts of discernment, wisdom, fairness and compassion. Help them hold on to a vision of our nation as a city on a hill which enables and empowers all of its people, old and young, rich and poor, sick and healthy, black and white, to live in liberty, security and well being.
>
> Oh God, bless this nation in this season of Thanksgiving with new resolve to be part of your new creation, to seek justice, to care for the needy, to walk humbly with you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture
Isaiah 65:17-25
John 15:1-11

"Make a joyful noise to the Lord ... Worship the Lord with gladness ... Enter his gates with thanksgiving, ..."
Psalm 100 (NRSV)

Jonathan Kozol has written a new and important book about the children who live in the South Bronx, the poorest neighborhood in the nation. It is a powerful book. Kozol is a good writer who cares deeply about what this nation has done and continues to do to the poorest and weakest and most vulnerable — its ghetto children. Yet, the title of his new book is *Amazing Grace.*

One of the few institutions which remains viable in the Bronx neighborhood, which is the book's focus is St. Ann's, an Episcopal Parish Church with a committed and resourceful clergyperson, The Reverend Martha Overall. The children of the neighborhood who participate in St. Ann's live in the midst of unimaginable violence, filth, tragedy, absolute social disintegration and chaos. Their friends die in fires, falling down elevator shafts, gun fire which is a daily occurrence and disease. The police know the neighborhood as the "deadliest in the nation." [p. 5] The children live and work and play in and around vacant lots, burned out and boarded up buildings, garbage incinerators. One of their diversions is a twice-weekly event in a small park: volunteers arrive two times a week to distribute free condoms and clean needles to addicted men and women. The neighborhood also has the highest HIV-AIDS incidence in the nation, because drugs and prostitution go together. Ironically, in the church yard of St. Ann's is the grave of one of the nation's Founding Fathers, Gouveneur Morris, who wrote the preamble to the Constitution.

Kozol's book alternates between the ghastly description of the neighborhood and grace-filled accounts of the children:

> "The children in the after school program at St. Ann's line up at the kitchen counter in the basement of the church to receive their dinner of chicken nuggets, potatoes, vegetables and apple juice from several mothers and grandmothers of the church. There are 36 children — half are black, half are Puerto Rican ... Some are whispering and giggling. An imposing looking woman, one of the grandmothers, comes out of the kitchen and just folds her arms. The children quiet down and clasp their hands. Reverend Overall, who is standing by the door, closes her eyes. The children say their prayers in lively unison, as if it were a football cheer:
>
> God is good!
> God is great!
> Thank you for
> the food we eat!
> Amen!
> Be good!
>
> They dig into their dinner ..." [p. 220]

In the very first chapter of the book, after introducing the horrendous environment in which the children live, Kozol asks what amounts to a theological question:

> "What is it like for children to grow up here? What do they think the world has done to them? ... Do they think that they deserve this? What is it that enables some of them to pray? When they pray, what do they say to God?" [p. 5]

That may be the fundamental question. What do you say to God when you live in the South Bronx, when you are eight-years-old and your best friend died of gun shot wounds last week, and your Mother takes you to the park twice a week to exchange needles and get condoms?

It almost takes my breath away to say the answer because it seems utterly preposterous, but what the children say when they pray is:

> God is good!
> God is great!
> Thank you.

At the heart of religion is an amazing sequence of affirmations so brave, so bold, so profound, so deeply a part of who we are as human beings that, given half a chance, we will make them and cling to them, live for them and die by them.

God is good ... God is great ... Thank you.

The way you used to become a Presbyterian was to memorize the Shorter Catechism which begins on that note. The Shorter Catechism, written 300 years ago consists of brief questions followed by an answer.

When I was confirmed, back in the dark ages, the process involved attending a six-week class taught by the minister. The agenda was the precise memorization of as much of the Shorter Catechism as one could accomplish. He would ask the question and we would recite the answers, around the table, one at a time. It rather appealed to my competitive instincts and so I memorized the whole thing and used to wait for my classmates to stumble so that I could come to the rescue. Six weeks, the entire Shorter Catechism and then I forgot it, all of it, immediately — all but the first question and answer. I'll bet I'm not the only one who remembers it.

Q.What is the chief end of man?
A.Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

I didn't understand it at the time. In fact, I don't think we had a clue to what that means. And if the minister knew, I don't recall him telling us, although he probably tried. I do recall the distinct sense that "glorifying God" sounded suspiciously like sitting in church; and "glorifying God forever" sounded like a very long church service, not exactly an enticing prospect then — or now, for that matter. As for enjoying God, there were some things about church and religion that were enjoyable, mildly: church camp and friends, but I would not have called any of it fun, delightful, delectable, joyful.

I have concluded that those crusty old Calvinist who wrote the Shorter Catechism had hold of a very big and very important idea and it has taken me most of my life to get it. The idea is that God has made us for joy, for enjoyment, for pleasure, for full and rich and deeply satisfying life, that joy and pleasure is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian and furthermore, that the joy which is at the heart of it all has a lot to do with our own attitude of thankfulness. God is Great! God is Good! Thank you.

That remains a new and somewhat puzzling idea to many. For one thing there is a lot about the formal practice of religion that doesn't seem like much fun. We Presbyterians particularly have turned religion into a somber responsibility.

What does it mean that the highest purpose of our life is to enjoy and to glorify — to acknowledge, worship, praise and thank the One who made us?

When C. S. Lewis became a Christian he brought his witty, literate scholarliness with him. In a delightful little book on the Psalms he recalls his first impression that God's continual harping in the Psalter on the subject of praise, adoration and worship sounded a little trivial, a little self-serving, actually it was as if God were saying: "What I most want is to be told that I am good and great." But then, after a while, Lewis concluded that the Psalmist knew something he didn't; that not to admire and praise God is to miss something important.

Furthermore, the more he did it himself and observed other people, the more Lewis concluded that there was a connection between praise and happiness.

> "I had not noticed" he wrote "how the humblest and, at the same time, most balanced minds praised most; while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least. Praise," he concluded, "almost seems to be inner health made audible."

And then — and this is the key:

> "We delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment. It is its appointed consummation." [*Reflections on Psalms*, pp. 78-81]

So — part of pleasure, enjoyment is responding to it with gratitude. Joy is not quite complete until it is expressed in thanksgiving, "praise is the consummation of enjoyment."

Don McCullough, President of San Francisco Seminary recalls an experience that we have all had. He heard a concert by Luciano Pavarotti which exceeded his highest expectations. Aria after aria was sung with incredible brilliance and passion. Pavarotti was singing to the audience — the audience was loving the music and the musician.

> "We had to respond," he recalls, "we jumped to our feet and clapped, hooted, whistled. We did not stop for a long time. Wave after wave of grateful applause was sent up to the platform."

And then McCullough recalls that:

> "In the midst of this mayhem of gratitude, when my hands were beginning to ache, I thought to myself, this is deeply satisfying, a profound joy." [*The Trivialization of God*, p. 103]

Walter Brueggemann is one of our most distinguished and thoughtful biblical scholars. He writes:

> "Praise is the duty and the delight, the ultimate vocation of the human community. Praise is not only a human requirement and a human need, it is also a human delight."
>
> [*Israel's Praise*, p. 1]

An important part of spiritual maturing for many of us was when our participation in the public worship of God changed from duty to delight; when we realized that while our parents may have forced the issue and the community may have seemed to expect it of us, the real reason we kept going to church was because of our need, that at some place deep in our own souls we need to acknowledge God, praise God, thank God.

> God is good!
> God is great!
> Thank you!

And so we come to Thanksgiving — in a sense that one American holiday which remains relatively untouched by the marketplace. You don't have to purchase new clothes or buy presents, send cards, attend parties. All you have to do is say "thank you."

The praise of God which is the source of enjoyment is not pollyannish, nor sentimental, nor trivial. It is not only because we happen to have an abundance of food and shelter and clothing and material comfort. Of course we are grateful for what we have but it is far more than that. It is for the miracle of God's grace, for life renewed each morning, for dear ones to love, for God's goodness and mercy in Jesus Christ, for the blessings of each common day.

Of course, we are grateful and give thanks for what we have. Praise and gratitude consummate the experience of enjoyment but the gratitude which brings the deepest happiness transcends the moment, the immediate experience and encompasses the mystery of life and the greater mystery of God's love and the promise of God's steadfastness,

that God will provide not what we want but what we need: God will be with us and hold us and not abandon us on good days and not so good days, when we are healthy and happy and when we are frightened and sick and discouraged. "We have so much for which to be thankful. Let us praise God!" Anne Frank wrote that in her diary on her last Hanukkah.

And one time a young man, on the worst night of his life, about to be arrested and tried, his last night actually, gathered his friends around a table and they ate their last meal together, and he broke bread with them and for them, their constant reminder of God's faithfulness and providence, and he lifted a cup — which they knew as the Cup of Thanksgiving — to remind them at the moment, that God would be with them in all the days ahead.

And among the very last things he said to them around that thanksgiving meal was this:

> "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

There it is. Our chief end, our highest purpose, is to glorify and enjoy God forever, the God who, in Jesus Christ has promised to be with us, to strengthen and provide for and love us forever.

Karl Barth, the eloquent and brilliant theologian, author of twelve huge volumes of theology, when it came to this subject wrote: "What else can we say to what God gives us but stammer praise."

At a family wedding a few weeks ago, the father of the groom, my brother, at the reception, a good and great party that had been underway for some time, stood up as the food arrived to propose his toast and he also said to the festive crowd: "In our home, when we sit down to eat we say thank you." And then he prayed one of the simplest but most eloquent prayers I have ever heard. He said:

> "Thank you for David and Brook. Thank you for their love. Thank you for this food and for the great privilege of eating it together. Thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

All we can do is stammer... or borrow the words of the poet:

> "i thank you God for most this amazing day ..."

Or sing the glorious hymns of thanksgiving which every preacher knows gather up the gratitude of our hearts and give it voice better than a hundred thanksgiving sermons, or ponder the elegance of the architect who blessed us with the weekly reminder that praise and thanksgiving are at the heart of who we are, by assembling an orchestra of angels over our heads: playing trumpets, harps, flutes and cymbals — in praise to God.

Or borrow the words, the gratitude of the children:

> God is great!
> God is good!
> Thank you!
> Amen.